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## "IN THE DAYS OF '49."

By J. M. Guinn.

In the life of a nation, as in that of the individual, accident more often than design shapes career. Scattered through the histories of nations are the records of unforeseen events—accidents that have changed the whole future of empires. In the history of our own country the discovery of gold in California, which was purely accidental, marks the beginning of a new epoch. It marks the turning point in our career as a nation from agriculturism to commercialism.

Before that event agriculture had been the absorbing industry of the country. We were the bread growers of Europe—content to grow wheat for a foreign market, and cotton for the mills of England. Then seven-tenths of our population lived on farms and tilled the soil—there were no vast combinations of capital; no trusts; no great railroad systems; no multi-millionaires; no Pierpont Morgans.

Before 1850, John Jacob Astor, the Indian fur trader and founder of the Astor family, was the only millionaire in the United States. He was a veritable curiosity to the people—a man worth a million dollars! Men craned their necks to see him as he passed, and women turned to gaze after him in the streets.

The gold mines of California in half a decade after their discovery became known abroad added to the wealth of the United States \$300,000,000, equivalent to an increase of \$15 per capita to every man, woman and child in the country at that time. No nation ever before grew rich so rapidly. Rome at the height of her power and in the palmiest days of her plundering, never, in so short a time, gathered from conquered peoples such heaps of gold. The golden ransom that Francisco Pizarro, the swineherd of Truxillo, exacted from the Incas of Peru for the release of their captured chieftain, Atahualpa, amounted to a little over \$6,000,000, an amount scarcely equal to the yield of the California placers for a single month. Such a sudden increase in wealth prompted great undertakings, stimulated every form of industry and encouraged immigration. It built up great inland cities and hastened by at least two decades the settlement of the vast unpeopled expanse between the Missouri and the

Sierra Nevadas. The admission of California into the Union as a free State, which was made possible by the discovery of gold, struck the first note in the death knell of human slavery and was the precursor of the Civil War.

The exact date of Marshall's discovery of the golden nuggets in the mill race at Coloma is still a matter of dispute. Marshall in his lifetime gave three different dates, the 18th, 19th and 20th, and today, 55 years after the event, one society of Pioneers celebrates January the 19th as the true date and another the 24th.

The discovery, at first, was not regarded of great importance. It took six weeks for the news to reach San Francisco, although that city was only 120 miles away. And it was nine months before the report of Marshall's find reached the Eastern States. When the news was confirmed—when there was no longer doubt or cavil about the enormous wealth of the California placers—then there was an awakening of the nation hitherto unparalleled in its history. The spirit of adventure became epidemic and men who never before had ventured a day's journey from home cut loose from all the ties that bound them and joined in a pilgrimage to the shrine of Mammon that was fraught with dangers and beset with difficulties appalling to the stoutest hearts.

In the year 1849, one hundred thousand people found their way to California. They came by every known route and many by routes hitherto unknown. They came by every means of conveyance known to travel by land or sea. They came from every civilized land on the globe. All castes and conditions of men came—the good and the bad, the industrious and the indolent, the virtuous and the vicious. This rapid influx of population wrought magical changes in the land of gold. It transformed it from a land of *mañana*—a land of tomorrow—to one of today. It changed it from a lotus land of ease where life was a sensuous dream to the arena of the most resistless energy and the fiercest struggle for existence.

When gold was discovered, San Francisco was a little hamlet of a few houses clustering close to the shores of Yerba Buena cove. In a little more than two years after, it had grown to be a city of 25,000 souls. It had climbed the sand hills and built out over the bay. The commerce of the world sought its harbor and, it might be added, much of it remained there. Five hundred ships deserted by their officers and crews, lay rotting on the Mission flats. Repeatedly swept out of existence by great

fires, phoenix like it arose from its ashes and grew better and bigger after each conflagration.

In the beginning it was a make-shift city, built on an emergency. No one expected to remain in it longer than to make his fortune. Its first inhabitants had no municipal pride in its appearance. The strip of level land that skirted the cove was soon built over, then the city had either to climb the hills like Rome, or wade out into the bay like Venice. It did both, but first it tilted the tops of the hills into the bay and sat down on dry land. Its principal streets are successions of cuts and fills. Market street, its grandest avenue, is in places 60 feet below its old level and in others 30 above. Rome was built on seven hills, but the city of Saint Francis has climbed over seventy. Its municipal infancy was beset with many discouragements. Flood as well as fire conspired against it.

Eighteen hundred and forty-nine was one of the great flood years of California. As in Noah's days, the windows of the heavens were opened, the rains descended and the floods came. Fifty inches of rain are said to have fallen in San Francisco, and the Pluvial downpour was even greater in the mining regions. The newly arrived Argonauts had been told before their departure from the States that California was a hot, dry country where little rain fell. As a consequence they made but scanty provision against winter storms.

The rainy season of 1849 began early in November and was heralded in the mountains by a downpour of nine inches in a single night. The miners were driven from their camps by the floods, and as they shivered in the pitiless storm they ironically discussed the question whether it was pleasanter to die of thirst on a waterless desert or be drowned by inches in a country where it seldom rains.

In San Francisco the wash from the hills flooded the unpaved streets. The continued rains and traffic soon reduced the detritus into the consistency of pea soup. Men and animals floundered through the liquid mud. Drunken loafers roistering around the streets at night fell into the Serbonian bogs misnamed streets, and if no friendly hand was near to extricate them they sank deeper and deeper into ready-made graves, uncoffined, unwept, and unsung. A story is told that one day a hat was seen floating down the muddy tide of Montgomery street. A spectator lassoed it and as it was lifted a man's head appeared. He was rescued and brought ashore, when he begged the spectators to save his horse, which was still below. The

story, however, does not rest on any more substantial foundation than did the submerged rider and his mythical steed.

It was during this winter that the famous sidewalk of flour bags, cooking stoves, tobacco boxes and pianos was constructed. The only sidewalks then were made of pieces of boards, dry goods boxes, crockery crates and other refuse of the stores. These were continually disappearing in the ooze. Lumber was \$600 per thousand and retailed at a dollar a square foot. A sidewalk of plank would have bankrupted the municipality. The walks, such as they were, were built by the merchants to help their trade.

This famous sidewalk was on the west side of Montgomery street, between Clay and Jackson. It extended from the Simmons, Henderson & Co. building to the Adams Express Company's office. It began with 100-pound sacks of Chilean flour. Then followed a long row of cooking stoves, over which it was necessary to carefully pick your way, as some of the covers were gone. A damaged piano bridged a chasm and beyond this a double row of large tobacco boxes completed the walk. This sidewalk has been held up as an example of the extravagance of the days of '49. And yet the material in it was the cheapest sidewalking in the market. A few months before flour was selling at \$400 a barrel. Everybody in trade ordered flour. The nearest place to secure it was Chile, and ship load after ship load was thrown on the San Francisco market until it was not worth the storage.

Some merchants in New York, witnessing the great rush to California, conceived the idea of shipping consignments of cooking stoves to California. The miners would need them in their housekeeping and it would be a fine stroke of business to forestall the demand. The shippers did not know that the miners' kitchen outfit consisted of a frying pan and a coffee pot. The freight on a cooking stove up into the mountain mining camps would have bankrupted a miner's claim. So the consignment of cooking stoves was left to rust and rot until utilized for sidewalks. As to pianos, nobody had time to play on them, and the scarcity of houses made their room more valuable than their company.

In the East, ignorance of the needs of the miners and the customs of the country were responsible for some ludicrous mistakes. A merchant of New York bound for California, who had dealt in millinery goods, conceived the idea that it would be a fine stroke of business to ship a consignment of ladies' bon-

nets to San Francisco. The Leghorn bonnet of '49 was a capacious affair—modeled after the prairie schooner, or the schooner was modeled after the bonnet, I am not certain which. The bonnet had a dip in the middle and sharp peaks fore and aft; so had the schooner.

The merchant sent his consignment around Cape Horn and came to California himself via the Isthmus. Arriving here he found to his dismay that the Spanish women did not wear bonnets, but covered their heads with rebosas, and the Spanish ladies were about all the women in California then. The poor fellow was in despair; all his money was invested in bonnets. The bonnets were down at Cape Horn or thereabouts, and there was no way of intercepting the shipment and returning it before it completed its voyage of 18,000 miles.

In due time the vessel arrived. In those days there were no warehouses and ship's cargoes were auctioned off on their arrival. Almost in despair, the merchant put up his bonnets at auction. The city happened to be full of miners well supplied with gold dust. The sight of a woman's bonnet recalled memories of home, of mothers, wives, sisters and sweethearts. In a spirit of freakishness they bid off the bonnets at an ounce (\$16) apiece. Red shirted miners paraded the streets with heads ensconced in fashionable bonnets of the vintage of '49—and were happy. So was the merchant, whose venture paid him well.

Merchandising in the fall of '49 and spring of '50 was a make-or-break business. If a consignment of goods reached San Francisco when the market was bare of needed articles which the consignment contained the merchant's fortune was made who secured it. If it reached there when the market was overstocked he was in danger of bankruptcy.

At one time 5-cent papers of carpet tacks sold at \$5 each. A pound of salaratus retailed at \$16, and a drop of laudanum at a dollar. A hogshhead of New England rum arrived when the market was empty of that beverage. The rum retailed at \$20 a quart, and one man offered \$10 for the privilege of sucking a straw through the bung hole. His offer was refused, as his capacity was known to exceed a pint.

The yield of the mines in early days was enormous, and rich strikes numerous. No occupation is more exciting than placer mining. The stroke of a pick may open one of nature's treasure vaults and make you independently rich. Hope buoys you up to brave hardships and fatigues that would crush you in other occupations. Think of taking out ten thousand dollars in a day or picking up a nugget that was worth a prince's ran-

som. Such things were possible in the days of '49. The extent and richness of the mines then were problematic. There were no diggings so rich that there might not be richer beyond. Men would abandon claims paying twenty, thirty or even fifty dollars a day on the rumor that at some other camp men were making \$100 a day. When the news first spread abroad throughout the states of the wonderful gold discoveries in California the crudest ideas prevailed in regard to the way gold was mined. Not one man then in 50,000 had ever seen a grain of virgin gold, and not one in 100,000 had ever seen a gold mine. The only gold mines in the United States before the acquisition of California were in the mountains of North Carolina and Georgia, and these were so situated that many intelligent persons had never heard of their existence. It was known that gold was found in the sand and gravel and to separate it from these Yankee ingenuity set to work to invent labor-saving machines. Patented machines with cranks and treadles to be propelled by hand or foot power; overshot wheels to work inventions by water power; and powerful engines constructed so as to be placed on scows and driven by steam were designed to dredge the bottoms of rivers, which were believed to be covered with gold. Then there were buckets with augur and valve attachment at the bottom, and long iron handles—these were intended to bore down into the subaqueous deposits and bring up the gold, that the augur loosened, and deposited in the buckets. Even diving bells were constructed for deeper water, and the diver was expected to pick the golden nuggets off the bottom of the river.

Haskins in his "Argonauts of '49" describes one of these machines, which was on board the ship he came on. "One machine," says he, "requires special mention. It was in the shape of a huge fanning mill with sieves properly arranged for assorting the gold ready for bottling. All chunks too large for the bottles would be consigned to the pork barrels. This immense machine, which during our passage excited the envy of all who had not the means and opportunity of securing a similar one, required the services of a hired man to turn the crank whilst the proprietor would be busily engaged in shoveling in pay dirt and pumping water, the greater portion of his time, however, being required, as was firmly believed, in corking of bottles and fitting the heads to the pork barrels as they were filled with gold. This machine was owned by Mr. Allen of Cambridge, Mass., who had brought with him a colored servant to turn the crank of this invaluable invention. Upon landing we found

lying upon the sands and half buried in the mud hundreds of similar machines bearing silent witness at once to the value of our gold-saving machinery without the necessity of a trial."

Nor was it those who came by sea alone that brought these curious but worthless inventions. Men hauled gold machines across the plains, over waterless deserts, over precipitous mountains, often sacrificing the necessities of life to save the prized instruments that were to make their fortunes; and when they reached the mines haggard, half starved, but bringing in triumph their labor-saving machines—only to find themselves the butt of ridicule and their machines the laughing stock of the mining camp. Haskins says: "Animated and often acrimonious discussions were carried on while on the voyage to California in regard to the better means of getting their gold down from the mines. Some were in favor of bottles, others favored pork barrels. The pork barrel advocates won by showing that the barrels could be rolled down to the Coast, thus saving freight." John S. Hittell says when he and some others discovered a wonderfully rich pocket of gold at the foot of Mount Shasta in the fall of '49, supposing the whole gulch underlaid with gold, they seriously discussed the question whether they should send for a train of pack mules or a number of ox teams to bring out the gold. They were relieved of the necessity of sending for either.

The rush and greed for gold and the ways of getting it is not all there is to the story of the Argonauts. There were deeds of charity the most noble and acts of self-sacrifice the most unselfish. There were friendships formed stronger than that of Damon and Pythias. There were romances in their lives most thrilling and adventures most daring. There was enough in their search for the golden fleece to have formed material for an epic grander than the Illiad and more fascinating than the Odessy. The California immigrants of the early fifties who came from the older states were a superior class. They were drawn from the most intelligent, the most progressive and the most venturesome of the population of the different localities from whence they came. All honor to the noble men and women who braved perils by sea and land to lay strong and deep the foundations of a new commonwealth. They did their work well. They left the impress of their characters on the State they founded. To them it owes much of its renown for progress, intelligence and enterprise. All honor to the Pioneers living and respect for the memory of those who have passed over the divide that separates time from eternity.